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Testimony on H.R. 1505 AND H.R. 587

THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS
OF THE
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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Mr. Chairman and other distinguished members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, my name is Dale Penny. I am the President and CEO of the Student Conservation Association (SCA), the nation's largest youth conservation service organization. Thank you for inviting me to testify about the Public Lands Service Corp Act of 2011 (H.R. 587). SCA strongly supports this timely and very important piece of legislation. H.R. 587 will put young people – including returning veterans – to work, provide them with much needed job skills during a period of high unemployment, and preserve and protect our public lands.

SCA, a nonprofit, was started in 1957 by Liz Putnam, then a recent college graduate herself, who saw the need to engage young people in helping preserve National Parks. Since then, nearly 70,000 high school and college students have served with SCA on public lands across the country, from the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest and the Kaibab National Forest in the southwest to Acadia National Park in Maine and the Tongass National Forest in Alaska. In addition to SCA's national reach, there are more than 150 local, state and regional conservation corps across the nation that also engage young people in parks, forests and refuges across the country.

H.R. 587 is needed now more than ever. The unemployment rate for 16 to 24 year olds is 19.1 percent, according to the Department of Labor. For returning veterans age 18-24, the unemployment rate last year was 21.9 percent, and is expected to be higher this year. H.R. 587 would expand the opportunities for young people and returning veterans to provide cost-effective and much needed work to help maintain and preserve our public lands for future generations.

In 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to help address the massive unemployment of young people through the conservation of America's natural and cultural resources. The CCC built the infrastructure of national parks, planted billions of trees, and pioneered new ways to fight forest fires. The CCC's work restored our public lands,

stimulated the economy, and helped build communities in every State in the country. Over three million young people served in the CCC.

SCA is modeled after the CCC. Through its innovative, cost-effective, and proven programs, SCA provides participants with hands-on service opportunities in virtually every conservation and natural resource field imaginable. Our members have provided wildfire education and outreach to ranchers, rendered conservation education to farmers, built and repaired hiking trails, and much more.

Last year, SCA placed over 4,200 high school, college students, and graduate students on over 500 public land sites across the country. Given the chance, many more young people and returning veterans would participate in our programs. On average, we now are receiving ten applications for each program slot we have available. Last year, the number was four applications for every slot.

The impact these young people have on the land through our programs is great. SCA exists to inspire lifelong stewardship in new generations of conservation leaders...and with a track record that stretches for more than five decades, the evidence that conservation services does, indeed, produce conservation stewards and natural resource managers is quite convincing. SCA's surveys show that about 55 percent of our participants have gone on to conservation-related careers and/or conservation-related activities. The National Park Service, for example, estimates that 12% of its workforce started their careers through SCA.

Moreover, SCA has had great success in creating a "continuum of service" to engage young people, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. In our rural and urban community programs, high school students receive summer jobs, work and life skills, and the opportunity to continue their job training on public lands with SCA as they progress through school in subsequent years. We have found that this opportunity to continue their training on public lands as they progress through school helps create a lifelong work ethic and a commitment to service.

In an innovative initiative, this year, SCA is partnering with the Southwest Conservation Corps and the Montana Conservation Corps to place young returning veterans in National Forests working on projects that combine facility restoration, construction and maintenance with modern efficiency retrofits. This innovative program will allow veterans to transition into natural resources and conservation-related career paths with the training in a successful industry. In addition, the team-based model used by SCA and other Corps allows veterans to continue giving back to the country by leveraging their military service into another form of national service. By strengthening the current public lands national service provisions, H.R. 587 will allow SCA and Corps to provide many more of these types of opportunities for our veterans.

Our programs also are making a difference in the private sector. For instance, many of our participants end up working in the outdoor recreation industry. The outdoor industry contributes approximately \$730 billion annually to the U.S. economy with the vast majority of this economic activity taking place on public lands managed by the federal government. SCA's programs help create a pipeline of talent for that industry.

Further, the work that our participants provide on our public lands is a cost-effective way to help the agencies get operations and critical maintenance work done that might not otherwise get completed. The maintenance backlog for the National Parks is estimated at \$9 billion and for the National Wildlife Refuges and National Fish Hatcheries it is estimated at \$3 billion. H.R. 587 is an important and necessary tool to help solve a host of challenges currently facing our public lands, while providing jobs and job training opportunities for young people.

We believe that partnerships with youth organizations like SCA and the Corps are indispensable to public land management agencies and the work they do. For more than 50 years, these agencies and our organizations have created mutually beneficial partnerships to advance the priorities of our youth and our public lands together. SCA and Corps help leverage public land agency resources with private sector and philanthropic funding and resources, and provide existing program infrastructure and capacity in each of the 50 states to help agencies cost-effectively do their work.

As we testified about the legislation in 2009, the sponsors and other supporters of this bill deserve tremendous credit for seeking to strengthen the original Public Land Corps Act and effectively expand it beyond parks to include forests, seashores and other public lands. Many of our young people can and will make the same difference on our oceans as they have done working in our National Parks and other public lands if given the opportunity. This bill provides that opportunity.

SCA strongly supports H.R. 587. This legislation allows the country to create jobs, provide necessary career training for youth and returning veterans, and protect and preserve our national treasures – our public lands.